



# Decoding Primary Sources

## Student Activity

Have you ever read a textbook or visited a museum, and wondered “how do we know that happened?” Do you ever wonder whose viewpoint is being told? Who is being represented, or what isn’t being said?

We learn about history through sources like oral histories, newspapers, photographs, books, and artifacts. These are called primary and secondary sources.

**Primary sources** are first-hand accounts of the topic or event.

**Secondary sources** are one step removed from a primary source; often covering the same topic, but adding a layer of interpretation, analysis, or opinion. They were created by someone who did not experience, first-hand, the experience, events, or conditions being studied.

### Primary Sources examples

Artifacts

Autobiography

Court transcripts

Diaries

Interviews

Letters

Photographs



### Secondary Sources examples

Biographies

Dissertations

Reviews

Scholarly writing

Newspaper articles

(after the fact)

#### To Survey Hawver Cave.

Dr. and Mrs. J. C. Hawver, H. H. Boone and family, Dr. and Mrs. Stark, Mr. and Mrs. Dickson, and child, Miss Ruth Birgevin, Henry Rose and Mr. Grill were a party who visited the Hawver Cave in Cave Valley, El Dorado county, Sunday.

The visit was made by Dr. Hawver and Mr. Boone, manager of the Pacific Portland Cement Company's quarries and railway, for the purpose of beginning a survey of the cave to determine its size and depth, and get such other data



**These questions can help you analyze a variety of different primary sources:**

1. What kind of source is it, and what era did it come from? Constructing the context a source was created in helps you better understand the source.
2. What is the purpose of the source. What was the author's message or argument?
3. What do you know about the author/creator? Race, gender, economic position, occupation, religion, age, region, political beliefs, etc. Does this effect how the source was created?
4. Who was the intended audience? Was it for one person, or the public?
5. What does it tell you about the time period in which it was created?
6. What does it tell you about the event or people it is describing, or written about? What does it NOT tell you?
7. What other sources could help you understand this source better?



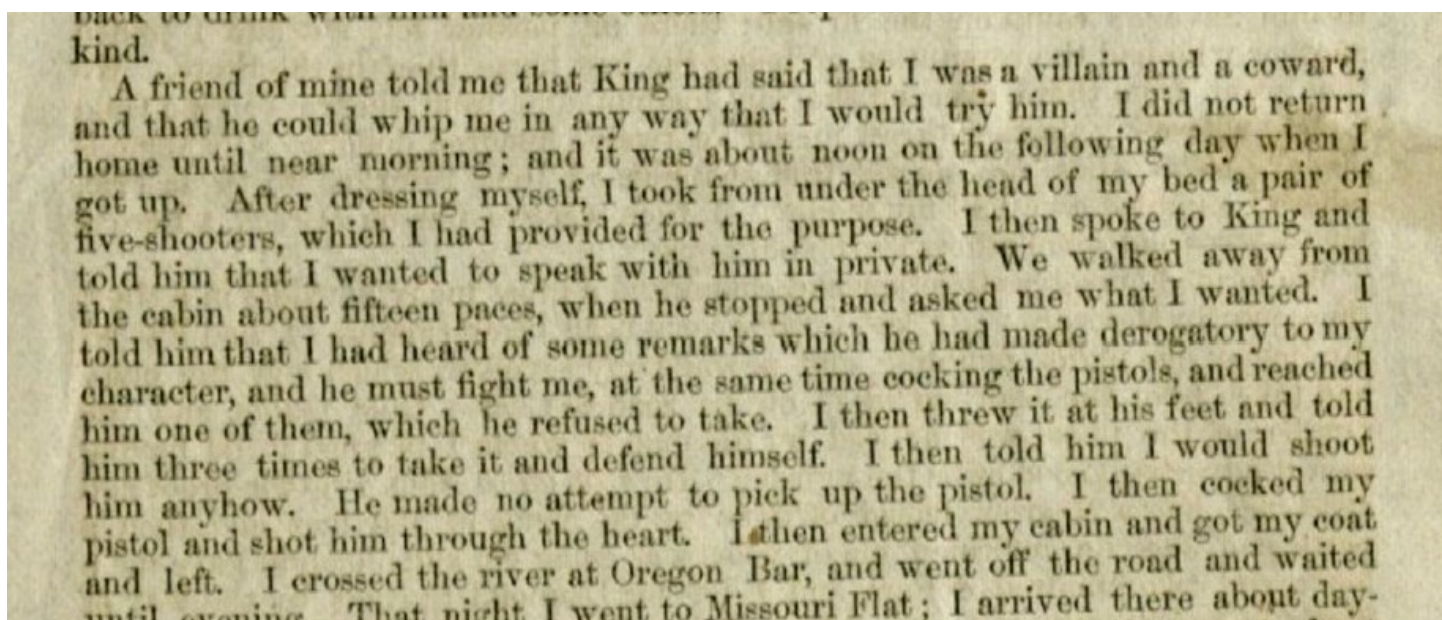


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The following documents are primary sources. They are first-hand accounts that describe the same event, in slightly different ways. To learn about our history we need to look at a variety of sources to gain a greater understanding of what happened, and how these experiences may have been interpreted differently by different people.

*Use the questions from the first page to analyze these documents.*



**The Confession, History and Life of Robert Scott Executed at Auburn, California, March 31, 1854, by Robert Scott.** Written by the convicted murderer in prison before his execution.

“After dressing myself, I took from under the head of my bed a pair of five-shooters, which I had provided for the purpose. I then spoke to King and told him that I wanted to speak with him in private. We walked away from the cabin about fifteen paces, when he stopped and asked me what I wanted. I told him that I had heard of some remarks which he had made derogatory to my character, and he must fight me, at the same time cocking the pistols, and reached him one of them, which he refused to take. I then threw it at his feet and told him three times to take it and defend himself. I then told him I would shoot him anyhow. He made no attempt to pick up the pistol. I then cocked my pistol and shot him through the heart. I then entered my cabin and got my coat and left.”





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6/21/79  
Testimony against R Scott  
John J Raman Sworn  
Resides near Auburn present at the time King  
was killed about the 20<sup>th</sup> Oct short acquaint-  
ance with Scott between 11 & 2 O'clock I was at  
the House and a young <sup>man</sup> by the name of Cain  
had been down on the river to get work  
Cain slept in the same House with King  
and Scott after returning Scott ordered Cain  
to call King up to get dinner Scott wished  
a private talk with said King in a few  
moments heard loud talk I did not under-  
stand what was said went out immediatly  
and Scott had a bundle of close and un-  
rolled them and took out 2 revolvers and  
told King to take that throwing one of the revo-  
lvers down and said defend yourself nobod  
I wont take it or I will shoot and did shoot  
and King run into the House and said he  
has killed me seen Scott go off  
seen King a few minutes a Corpse

**Murder Trial of Robert Scott, Testimony against Robert Scott by John J Raman.** Court testimony from a witness at the scene of the crime.

"Resides near Auburn present at the time King was killed about the 20th Oct short acquaintance with Scott between 11 & 2 o'clock & was at the House and a young man by the name of Cain [?] had been down on the river to get work Cain [?] slept in the same house with King and Scott after returning Scott ordered Cain to call King up to get dinner Scott wished a private talk with said King in a few moments heard loud talk I did not understand what was said went out immediately and Scott had a bundle of close [sp] and unrolled them and took out 2 revolvers and told King to take that throwing one of the revolvers down and said defend yourself no [?] [?] I won't take it or I will shoot and did shoot and King run into the house and said he has killed me seen Scott go off. Seen King a few minutes a corpse."